

Social Media Style and Editorial Guidelines

USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov

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1. Introduction

1.1. About this document

This document contains guidelines to ensure a consistent voice, tone, and standard of quality for content distributed by USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov through social media channels. These guidelines complement the existing style guides written for USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov with additional considerations for writing content appropriate for social media outlets.

This document has been prepared to assist all people involved in the creation and management of such content. Unless otherwise stated, the guidelines in this document apply to both USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov.

The recommendations in this document may apply to other government agencies or organizations, and all are invited to borrow, adapt, and repurpose these guidelines for their own use.

This is a living document.

1.2. How social media differs from traditional media

Social media refers to services that enable individuals to publicly create, share, and discuss information. These services contrast with traditional media such as non-interactive websites, pamphlets, or public service announcements that convey information without providing opportunities for public interaction.

USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov's usage of social media can refer to two things:

1. Creation of USA.gov or GobiernoUSA.gov hosted services that allow individuals to comment, rate, or publicly interact with official government content such as the GovGab blog
2. Distribution of official government content through third-party social media services such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, etc

This document focuses on #2: distribution of official government content through third-party social media services. These guidelines do not apply to #1: USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov hosted social media services.

2. Our audience

2.1. The user's perspective

Social media services allow users to subscribe to wide variety of information from different sources, whereas traditional media merely presents users with information in contexts and settings wholly controlled by the publisher. Because of this, editors should consider a variety of contexts in which social media users will encounter our content.

USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov content distributed through social media must compete with content from other individuals and organizations. A news story, blog post, or instructional guide may be shared in its entirety, or in part, among other content created by individuals and other organizations. Content shared via social media outlets may include opportunities for engagement such as rating, sharing, and public commenting.

2.2. Audience profile

The USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov social media audience is comprised of people who are interested in using social media tools to stay up to date on official, timely, and relevant U.S. government information.

Through a survey issued to social media users from October 22, 2008 to Jan 5, 2009, we have learned that our audience of social media users vary widely in age (average age is 37 years old), are interested in a variety of official government information, and are interested in engaging with government through social media.

Audience interests

The survey mentioned above and ongoing engagement with our audience has indicated audience interest in:

- Emergency information
- Event and observance information
- Employment
- Guidance on government tasks such as passport applications
- Ways to protect the environment

- Ways to contact elected officials
- Consumer product recalls
- Consumer protection information

Audience Profile Considerations for GobiernoUSA.gov

The audience of GobiernoUSA.gov encompasses Hispanics in the United States and Spanish speakers in other countries. This audience is likely comprised of bi-lingual and Spanish-preferring individuals interested in specific government information relevant to this segment of the population.

In addition to the interests listed above, the audience of GobiernoUSA.gov has demonstrated interest in:

- Immigration requirements
- Visa applications

We do not expect many users to subscribe to updates from both USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov. Because of this, we assume that USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov serve two distinct audiences. To ensure that both audiences receive the same updates, most of the information distributed through USA.gov outlets should be simultaneously distributed through GobiernoUSA.gov outlets.

Certain kinds of information relevant to the USA.gov audience will be irrelevant to the GobiernoUSA.gov audience and vice versa. Examples:

- Information about Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month may not be relevant to the GobiernoUSA.gov audience
- Information about new immigration resources for Spanish speakers may be too narrow for the USA.gov audience

2.3. Organizations

Many members of our audience represent organizations such as government agencies, libraries, community centers, newspapers, and schools. These organizations look to USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov for official government information that they can relay to their own constituencies.

Effectively reaching an organization can enhance our impact, as these organizations may re-broadcast our messages to their constituents. Despite this, we should not tailor our social media messages for organizations. In order to facilitate re-broadcasting of our message to constituents via these organizations, content distributed through social channels should be written for and directed toward constituents.

2.4. Identifying relevant content

Success with social media requires providing quality content that is relevant and timely to constituents. This often requires including a link to an official government, approved non-profit, or approved NGO website with further information. Links distributed through social media outlets should follow USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov qualifying link guidelines. All content distributed through social media should focus on [audience interests](#), and adhere to as many of the following guidelines as possible.

Guidelines for quality content:

- Accurate
- Timely
- Applicable to a wide audience
- Useful or actionable
- Comprehensive
- Easy to read and understand
- Related to a current official U.S. government event, observance, or deadline
- Provides opportunities for engagement such as sharing, rating, and commenting

Avoid distributing the following kinds of content using social media:

- News reporting that lacks actionable information for constituents (e.g. news about Somali pirate attacks)
- Announcements about internal agency milestones or accomplishments
- Politically charged announcements
- Press releases
- PDFs

Example Do Not:

U.S. Dept of Homeland Security celebrates 10 year anniversary of NAFTA.
Read the press release at <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example Do:

U.S. border crossing requirements will change on June 1st. Find out if you're ready at <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Considerations for GobiernoUSA.gov

In addition to the above guidelines, GobiernoUSA.gov social media outlets should consider the following:

- When linking to Spanish language content, only link to Spanish language that is properly written or translated—referring users to poorly translated content may reflect poorly on GobiernoUSA.gov
- When timely and relevant content is not available in proper Spanish, use the above guidelines to determine if English language content is important enough to be promoted through GobiernoUSA.gov branded social media outlets
 - Provide an “en inglés” disclaimer when linking to English language content whenever possible

3. Voice and tone

3.1. The USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov voice

Any content published by USA.gov or GobiernoUSA.gov should confidently reinforce our reputation as a trustworthy source of official government information relevant to constituents. Every call to action and update should convey our dedication to helping constituents find official and useful government information.

Our voice is	Our voice is not
Straightforward	Curt
Authoritative, official	Patronizing
Polite, courteous	Ingratiating
Warm, friendly	Chummy, clever
Professional	Dull
Deliberate, purposeful	Self-serving, overbearing
Concerned for people's wellbeing	Fatalistic, morbid

Guidelines for writing content for social media:

Social media content should be written in conversational language. Most of the guidelines for developing content on USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov apply to content for social media outlets.

- Speak in the active voice
- Speak in the present tense
- Speak directly to constituents rather than about them
- Try to put key words toward the beginning of content
- Kindly direct constituents to use a service or complete a task using action-oriented language (e.g. *learn*, *discover*, *follow*, *register*, etc)
- Avoid colloquialisms and slang
- Avoid government jargon not commonly understood outside of Washington (e.g. agency acronyms or government abbreviations)

Example Do Not:

CDC and FDA form interagency initiative to create new media guide to promote safety in Americans' homes: <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example Do:

Learn to prevent injuries and create a healthy environment in your home with this instructional video: <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Considerations for GobiernoUSA.gov

Regional language differences among the GobiernoUSA.gov audience require that Spanish language content distributed by GobiernoUSA.gov be understood by a diverse audience. To accomplish this, Spanish content should follow the above guidelines as well as:

- Write in the informal form (tú) to encourage conversation and underscore our friendly voice
- Avoid regionally or culturally specific Spanish expressions
- Maintain gender neutrality as much as possible
- Be exceedingly cautious about using acronyms or abbreviations

3.2. Grammar

Character limitations imposed by some social media channels can frustrate perfect grammar. Perfect grammar is not required in social media, but editors should aspire to write with proper grammar consistent with USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov style guides whenever possible.

Being understood is paramount.

Exclamation points

All USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov updates are important, and, as such, exclamation points should be used very sparingly. Exclamation points may be used to enthusiastically thank users, announce celebratory holidays, or apply a cheery tone to content. If you are not sure if an exclamation point is appropriate to use, do not use one.

Never use more than one exclamation point at the end of a sentence or phrase.

Example Do Not:

If you live abroad, you have until June 15th to file your taxes! Details from the IRS: <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example Do:

Happy 4th of July!

Introducing URLs

Many social media outlets do not allow creation of hypertext links to URLs. When unable to create hypertext links, URLs can be introduced by using a colon or the word “at.” Either method is appropriate depending on the structure of the update, but do not use a colon and “at” simultaneously.

Colons:

Example Do Not:

Planning a trip to the beach or swimming pool? Swim safe with these tips from Medline Plus <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example Do:

Planning a trip to the beach or swimming pool? Swim safe with these tips from Medline Plus: <http://go.usa.gov/example>

At:

Example Do Not:

Unemployed? There are over 47,000 U.S. Government job opportunities worldwide. Search for yours at: <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example Do:

Unemployed? There are over 47,000 U.S. Government job opportunities worldwide. Search for yours at <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Considerations for GobiernoUSA.gov

When introducing URLs in Spanish, colons may be used to introduce URLs as well as the word “en.” Either method is appropriate depending on the structure of the update, but do not use a colon and “en” simultaneously.

Example Do Not:

Nada y disfruta actividades acuáticas de manera segura este verano en:
<http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example Do:

Nada y disfruta actividades acuáticas de manera segura este verano:
<http://go.usa.gov/example>

Special characters in Spanish

Diacritics such as acute accents (´), tildes (¨), umlauts (¨), and inverted question and exclamation marks may not render properly on some computers and mobile devices. As such, they should be avoided when writing content as long as doing so does not inhibit understanding.

3.3. Abbreviations and Acronyms

Technical restrictions sometimes limit the number of characters available to publish via social media. These limitations may sometimes require the usage of abbreviations and acronyms in content distributed through social media. Periods should be omitted in acronyms to save characters.

An exhaustive list of acronyms and abbreviations is available in chapter 9 of the GPO style guide.

If you are not sure that an acronym or abbreviation will be widely understood, do not use it.

Example Do Not:

The FCC has contracted with vendors to provide DTV assistance for consumers in need. Get ready for the transition at <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example Do:

You have two weeks to file your taxes with the IRS. File online at <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Considerations for GobiernoUSA.gov

As stated in the description of [the USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov voice](#), acronyms should be more actively avoided when writing content for GobiernoUSA.gov social media outlets, as the GobiernoUSA.gov audience is less likely to understand the significance of acronyms.

Because of character limitations and the conversational tone of social media, it is not essential to include a “por su sigla en inglés” disclaimer to acronyms used in social media content.

3.4. Emergency situations

Upper case

In extreme national emergency situations, updates may be preceded by words written in upper case letters (e.g. EMERGENCY, WARNING, DANGER) to call attention to emergency information. Such instances are

rare and all caps should be used sparingly as they can be interpreted by the users as shouting.

Examples of situations than may merit the use of capital letters include:

- Terrorist attacks on U.S. soil
- Massive hurricane threats
- Large scale earthquakes or other natural disasters

4. Platform specific considerations

4.1. Facebook

Facebook updates can include an additional URL or link to content on Facebook such as an event, photo album, or video.

When sharing links on Facebook, keep in mind that Facebook pulls in images and some language from the linked page. Editors have some control over the images and can edit the language pulled in from the page. At the point of sharing, editors should optimize these images and language to create a compelling call to action for constituents.

Identify an image germane to the content of the page and consider rewriting the headline and introductory copy in the [USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov voice](#).

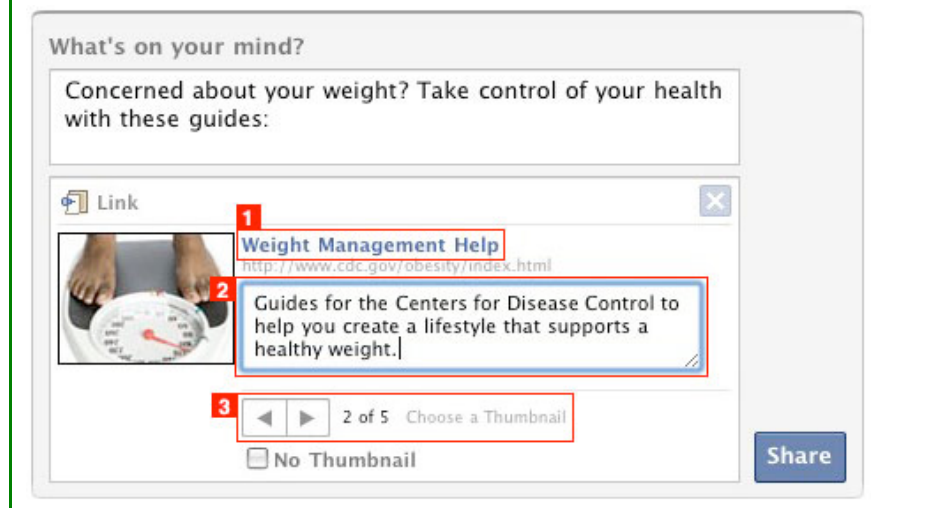
Example Do Not:

This image displays what is pulled in automatically when sharing a link from a CDC website. Note the acronyms in the headline [1], error text about Javascript in the link description [2], and the potentially unclear HHS logo [3].



Example Do:

This image displays how a link can be deliberately formatted when being shared on Facebook to create a more compelling content. Click on the headline [1] and link description [2] to edit them. Click on the thumbnail arrows [3] to select an image germane to the topic.



4.2. Twitter

Twitter updates are limited to 140 characters including spaces, requiring tight copy and use of shortened URLs.

Optimizing for re-tweeting

Whenever possible, Twitter updates should be written to allow constituents to re-broadcast our updates to their friend networks while giving attribution to USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov. This requires writing updates that users could copy our update and add “(via @USAgov)” or “(de @GobiernoUSA)” without exceeding 140 characters.

Based on this rule, Twitter updates should adhere to the following constraints:

Twitter Account	Character Limit
@USAgov	126
@GobiernoUSA	122

Example 117 character USA.gov tweet:

Watch the official US response to the World Health Org's H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic alert at <http://go.usa.gov/example>

Example 122 character USA.gov tweet on the same topic:

Ve la respuesta del Gobierno a la nueva alerta mundial de pandemia de gripe porcina: <http://go.usa.gov/example> (en inglés)